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On Enduring Political Authority: Comparing Oliver O'Donovan and the Book of Revelation

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Sending readers back to Scripture time and again creates enduring value for an author. This is precisely what makes Oliver O'Donovan a leading scholar in the field of political theology today. His careful and creative read of John the Seer's Revelation has been especially illuminating. In what follows, I wish to ask a question about the interpretation of O'Donovan's work, and to compare his thought regarding the nature of enduring political authority with John's vision in Revelation. To do this, I will first sketch O'Donovan's thought on the endurance of political authority and offer two possible interpretations. Second, I will examine John the Seer's framework for empire and its downfall. Third, from within this framework, I will consider the understanding of enduring political authority found in Revelation, with a close eye to Revelation 7. Finally, the comparisons will show a two-sided understanding of providence and political authority. O'Donovan's positive construal of enduring political authority as God's positive work is complemented by the negative vision of Revelation which sees enduring authority as evidence of God keeping at bay the forces of political change that God has ordained as part of his own judgment against creation. The value of such a formulation will be touched on briefly, as well.

Enduring Political Authority in O'Donovan

On its face, the nature of political authority appears simple: it seems to endure as long as a ruler holds on to political power, regardless of his or her actions. If political authority is considered in such a brute way, however, then there would be no difference between the tyrant and the well-functioning democracy. We must take a deeper look at exactly what constitutes a meaningful consideration of political authority. After this consideration, reflecting on its longevity or endurance will prove a little more complex.

How does proper authority differ from usurpation? If not considered simply as power, then what *is* political authority? Oliver O'Donovan defines political authority as the coordinated effort of the powerful execution of right to perpetuate a tradition.¹ This is most easily illustrated in the monarchy where the elements of judgment, power, and tradition are present in a single person: the King decides, executes his decision, and by his actions continues the authority of the royal family. These three elements differentiate proper authority from an improper one; therefore political authority can be present in all sorts of well (and even poorly) functioning governments. True political authority is responsible for judging. Where there is dispute, political authority must bring (right) resolution and so maintain a well functioning community. Consistently unjust judgments reveal that a government does not have true political authority, though it may have power. Political authority must also be able to enforce its resolution, or else there simply is no authority. Powerless political authority is no authority at all.

The trickiest element to this definition is tradition. We understand power. We can even understand judgment—though we may disagree with specific rulings. Tradition, however, is much more fluid as it refers to the story of a country, of a people,

of a community, and how the story ought to continue being told. To continue with the example of the monarchy, the King who completely disregards the direction of his people to such an extent that his actions become unintelligible has ceased being faithful to his people. By ceasing to be faithful to the community he has been born into, he has ceased to have political authority.² But tradition is not exact. Often countries have competing traditions in different regions, or competing interpretations of the same tradition. The hero for some is the rogue for others; the pivotal figure for some is the misguided poser for others, and so on. It remains the case, however, that traditions, though varied and wide, still *maintain* an identity. If two groups dispute the telling of a history, they must at least have enough agreement to be able to disagree intelligibly. As such, tradition is never *completely* unfettered. The history of political judgments in a place *has* shaped life in *that* place. Such a “realist” consideration of interpretation is O’Donovan’s insight:

Tradition inherited passes without pause into tradition developed.... There is no core of tradition which in every case *must* be carried on.... Recognizing the right of tradition...[depends] on *post hoc* judgments about how things have actually gone.³

But why is tradition so important? Power and right judgment are easily understood: no power, no authority; no right judgment, no justice. Both are necessary for political authority in obvious ways while tradition presents its case less noticeably. O’Donovan affirms tradition as necessary because authority is meant to serve a

¹ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 46.

² Perhaps one might consider the reforming kings of Israel as not being faithful to the recent tradition of the people. However, to the extent that the reformers were consistent with original religious aims of Israel they were faithful to a deeper and longer tradition.

³ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 147.

community. Since communities are formed by their traditions, the governing authority must exercise fidelity to the tradition it finds, or else forsake true political authority.

For instance, in the case of ancient Israel O'Donovan argues that

without the consciousness of something *possessed* and handed on from generation to generation there could be a theology of judgments but not a political theology, since it would never be clear how the judgments of God could give order and structure to a community and sustain it in being.⁴

In saying this, O'Donovan is not arguing that all political judgments are divine judgments or that all nations are just like Israel, but is describing the nature of political authority in ancient Israel in order to examine its presence in other societies.

Political theology — that is, theological reflection on the nature of political authority in a community — requires that the authority remain in continuity with effective justice. But governments are operated by humans and, as such, are fallible and make mistakes. Because the government that maintains true political authority always does so imperfectly, the question of enduring political authority is essential to political theology. So, I wish to ask a basic question: if there is such a thing as true political authority and if it can be lost, how do we understand the endurance of the imperfect coordinated agency that finds its identity in the conjunction of power, judgment, and tradition? Can humans sustain political authority on their own? Conversely, do tyrants continue in power because of God's providence?

In answering these last two questions, O'Donovan is possibly caught in a difficult position. On the one hand, he wishes to affirm that

⁴ O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 41.

[b]ehind every historically successful regime, there is the divine regime of history. The continuity achieved by the one presupposes the operation of the other, because it does not lie within the power of political orders to secure the social conditions for their own indefinite prolongation.⁵

Political authority cannot be maintained by brute force. Neither, however, is it created and sustained by human ingenuity and craft: “All regimes, however well constituted and conducted, are dogged by the possibility that their authority may be *eroded under the pressure of changing social circumstances*.”⁶ So, O’Donovan concludes, “That any regime should actually come to hold authority and should continue to hold it, is a work of divine providence in history, not a mere accomplishment of the human task of political service.”⁷ Clearly, for O’Donovan, political authority is, at least in part, a gift. However, there are two possible interpretations of this gift. Do regimes hold power because of the work of divine providence and this is seen in history? Or does the regime hold power because history itself is an outworking of divine providence, and in this way history provides space for political power?

Exploring O’Donovan’s work a bit more favors the latter interpretation. “Behind every historically successful regime, there is the divine regime of history.”⁸ This suggests that history provides the space for enduring political authority, but history only provides one facet of political authority—tradition. Yet this view leaves unconsidered power and judgment. Consider O’Donovan’s statement quoted above: “The continuity achieved by [the historically successful regime] presupposes the operation of [the divine regime of history], because it does not lie within the power of

⁵ O’Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 46.

⁶ O’Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 46.

⁷ O’Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 46.

political orders to secure the social conditions for their own indefinite prolongation.”⁹ It seems that the choice between the two interpretations becomes rather subtle. Either way, the social conditions are not established by political authority in itself, but by divine providence.

This conclusion, however, opens O’Donovan’s argument up to seven demons stronger than the first: if human craft and power are not responsible for political authority, does the tyrant, or the usurper of power who holds political responsibility *de facto* for significant time do so with God’s provision? O’Donovan is sensitive to the discussion of the nature of authority and when it becomes, or, better, *leans* in the direction of the tyrannical. Strictly speaking, *tyrannical government* is an oxymoron (lacking as it does fidelity to either tradition or justice), and so the tyrant who remains in power is not an enduring *political authority*. Further, O’Donovan notes that the semi-tyrant, who may maintain power for some time, does so via a mixture of “arbitrary oppression and ordered government.”¹⁰ In this tense relationship, O’Donovan maintains that God enables longevity by seeing ordered government persist “in the teeth of the arbitrary oppression that tends to destabilize.”¹¹ The imperfect nature of humanity here collides with the requirements of political authority. Nevertheless, while the armchair political observer may enjoy the luxury of watching from a distance as the government which overreaches its power, forgets its tradition, or neglects justice falls, how does one in the midst of such a situation consider the reality of a political authority that endures? Does the simple endurance of a political regime, by virtue of divine providence, confirm it as genuine political authority?

⁸ O’Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 46.

⁹ O’Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 46.

¹⁰ Oliver O’Donovan, email message to author, October 10, 2006.

O'Donovan's positive construal of political authority – that it resides in and is sustained by God's sovereign will – may yield a conclusion that is pastorally discouraging to the Christian suffering injustice from political authority, though other parts of his country are flourishing. Another vision of enduring political authority, expressed negatively, may provide a complementary understanding.

Enduring Political Authority in John the Seer's Revelation

The book of Revelation has been described as “the most powerful piece of political resistance literature from the period of the early Empire.”¹² If one is able to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church through John, then the apocalyptic vocation to “purge and to refurbish the Christian imagination” and to “unmask [the dominant culture's] construction of the world as an ideology of the powerful which serves to maintain their power”¹³ marks this text as a powerful piece of resistance literature. John's ability to reformulate and reinterpret the world in stark, shocking, yet ultimately hopeful pictures is potentially disastrous to any who would set up political ideology in a religious form. Against John's work, political dogma is shredded. For the contemporary Christian suffering under an empire that is enduring, it may provide valuable insight both in personal solidarity and by canonical encouragement.

Losing one's interpretive path in Revelation is all too easy. To remain focused on our question of the relationship between divine providence and enduring political authority, I wish to examine three aspects in Revelation, two in brief and one in detail. First, I will look at God in relation to the sea, the place from whence comes the beast of empire. I will briefly compare and contrast the Lamb and the Beast of the Sea, who is

¹¹ O'Donovan, email message to author, October 10, 2006.

¹² Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 38.

¹³ Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 159.

the poor imitation of God's true ruler. Second, I will closely examine God's judgments in the seven seals and in the second trumpet as they pertain to political authority. These will join to show another aspect of providence and enduring (or changing) political authority.

God and the Sea

In chapter 4, John is transported into heaven while in the Spirit, where he is given a vision of God's throne room. In his throne room portrait, John is conscious of describing God.¹⁴ It is no surprise, then, that everything in the throne room is described in relation to the throne and the one sitting on it, the object John first sees and the person he first describes (4:2-3): the rainbow *encircles* the throne (v. 3b); twenty-four elders and thrones *surround* the throne (v. 4); lightning and thunder come *from* the throne (v. 5); seven blazing lamps stand *before* the throne (v. 5b); and *around* the throne are the four living creatures (v. 6b). Just prior to the four living creatures, John describes before the throne something that looks like a crystal-clear sea of glass (v. 6). G.B. Caird describes the sea as the reservoir of evil, symbolizing all that is against the will of God.¹⁵ It is essential to emphasize not only the mythical nature of the sea, but the *condition* in which the sea is found, as well. It is *clear as crystal*, which tells us that the sea is calm. In God's presence and before the throne, the sea – and all that it symbolizes – is under control.

John's description becomes all the more important when the *same* sea reappears in chapter 15. Here, and only here, John describes the sea as a sea *of glass*, but this time it is mixed with fire (15:2). Beside the sea stand those who have been victorious over the beast and his image. Undoubtedly we are meant to draw together two images: first,

¹⁴ Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 35.

¹⁵ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1966), 65.

the throne room vision of the calm sea of glass, and, second, the vision of the beast arising from the sea (13:1). Yet here we see the triumph of those who reject the beast. Because of their triumph, the sea, no longer clear as crystal, is mixed with fire.

What are we to make of the fire? Consider Peter's vision in 2 Pet. 3:10: Peter declares that "the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." N.T. Wright points out that a variant reading of this passage is, "will be found," rather than "will be laid bare"¹⁶; several commentators have claimed that the sense communicated is "being found out," as in "discovered," "unhidden."¹⁷ In other words, "all creation will be destroyed by fire and all of it found out," is the gist. This clarifies Peter's exhortation to live holy and godly lives, which follows immediately. Exhortations to moral purity and holiness do not follow readily from a prediction of cosmic destruction, but they do from ensuing judgment. It makes more sense for Peter to say, "Just as everything will be destroyed in *this way*—the way of judgment and being found out—you should live godly lives, because you will be found out, too."

A similar reading of John's vision of the sea of glass mixed with fire demonstrates *why* those who stand beside it are victorious: they have heard what the Spirit was saying to the churches and have judged appropriately. Their victory spells defeat for the place from whence the beast comes. Next to the conquering saints, the sea is under judgment: it is mixed with fire. John completes the judgment of the sea itself by assuring his readers that in the new heaven and new earth there is no more sea (21:1). Whatever we are to make of the enduring political authority, the *source* of

¹⁶ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 463.

¹⁷ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 463.

bestly authority, the sea, while calm in the throne room, suffers judgment under faithful witness, and is ultimately removed from the new creation.

Seals and Trumpets

This connection between judgment and the martyrs leads us to consider two of John's visions of judgment: the seals (6:1-8:1) and the trumpets (8:2-9:21, 11:15-19). Along with the seven bowls, the seven seals and seven trumpets are different visions for God's judgment,¹⁸ each offering a different perspective. According to O'Donovan, the seals are judgments that work themselves out in the form of "worsening man-made calamities, originating in the ambition of conquest."¹⁹ The first four seals show this progression quite easily: first, there is a conquering rider, followed by a rider who makes war; next, there is a rider who bears economic injustice and a lack of goods—the effects of war; last, there is the rider named Death who shows the ultimate result of war. These seals, though a "natural," progressive cycle, are also judgments, because this implosive and successive state of affairs spells doom for those who do not seek God.²⁰

John's fifth seal, however, appears somewhat strange after the four riders: the martyrs cry out from beneath the altar, "How long, Sovereign Lord, before we are avenged?" (6:9-10). Their placement only makes sense when we see the nature of the *sixth* seal and the results of their prayers in the seven trumpets. Upon the opening of the sixth seal, John gives an apocalyptic description of the overthrow of political and economic empire in earthquakes and falling stars. Caird describes the symbolism of the earthquake, reminiscent of Is. 2:12-17, as the "overthrow of human arrogance, which

¹⁸ Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 40.

¹⁹ O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 153.

²⁰ These riders are embodiments of the story of political empires and their downfall. While the first two riders could embody specific people—a conqueror and a warring challenger, the second two better embody effects of the actions of the first two. Still, John's descriptions, if they are to be

has built a corrupt political and economic system in defiance of the holiness of God.”²¹ Further, Caird reminds his readers that behind nations stood angels, often likened to stars, and that in the punishment of nations there would also be the punishment of their angel – hence John’s observation that the “stars in the sky fell to the earth” (6:12).²² The massive political events that John is describing can only truly be captured in cosmic terms. Moreover, to put God’s works and their significance in creational terms was a common practice.²³

Pulling these threads together, I believe we can understand the role played by the martyrs in the fifth seal of judgment and interpret it using the following narrative. In the imperial pursuit of conquest and establishment of empire, the people of God consistently find themselves at odds with the warring rider and the effects he brings. In the effort to conquer, political ideology often becomes a masked form of religious doctrine and thereby becomes contrary to the church’s message.²⁴ By performing prophetic witness, “offering their testimony” as John puts it (6:9), the church falls under the wrath of those who inhabit the earth. For this reason John says that the church’s death in the war between the church and the beast of empire brings gloating and celebration from all “inhabitants of the earth” (11:10), precisely the same group (6:10: “the inhabitants of the earth”) that the martyrs wish God to judge. Against dogmatic

considered meaningful in history, must be open-ended enough for interpretation and application in multiple contexts, and even ages.

²¹ Caird, *Revelation*, 89.

²² Caird, *Revelation*, 89.

²³ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 283.

²⁴ See O’Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 154.

political empire, the church becomes an anti-political community, often suffering martyrdom.²⁵

The story continues, however: the martyrs' prayer of 6:9-10 is heard, and the wrath of the Lamb is unleashed in cosmic political upheaval with the opening of the sixth seal (6:16). God brings about the destruction of empire in the sixth seal because it is in resistance to empire, by their "testimony," that the martyrs suffer their fate. The Lamb responds to the prayers of the martyrs by bringing the downfall of political and economic empire that is their oppressor. We now see the narrative progression of the first four seals continued in the fifth and sixth.

This progression becomes even clearer under the second series of judgments, the trumpets. Here John explicitly describes God's judgments as being in response to the prayers of his people: the censer in which the angel gathers incense and the prayers of the saints is the same censer he pours out before God resulting in lightning and thunder (8:3-5), the elements which introduce us to the judgments of trumpets. First we are introduced to the intensified severity of these judgments: they destroy in thirds (8:7, and so on in vv. 8, 9, 12, 15), which is greater than the power to destroy one-fourth of the earth that was given to the fourth rider (6:8). More importantly, we are shown the political nature of God's judgment with the second trumpet. John observes that "something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood..." (8:8). Here Caird sees John's reappropriation of Jeremiah's description of Babylon where God declares that he is against this "destroying

²⁵ See Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 38. Here Bauckham points out that John's urge for Christians to critique Rome is not because Rome has persecuted Christians, but because of the Roman system of power in itself. So, John looks forward to the martyrdom that will result, not the martyrdom that is ongoing and past. This reinforces my interpretation of the location of the martyrs in the sixth seal.

mountain" (Jer. 51:25) and that the sea will rise over Babylon (Jer. 51:42).²⁶ John's alteration, according to Caird, is to show the destruction of the mountain itself as that which pollutes the sea, which Rome has used for economic gain.²⁷ (Hence, the merchants [18:11] and sea captains [18:17] mourn for Rome in her destruction.) Furthermore, this vision corresponds to that of the sea of glass mixed with the fire of judgment discussed above. Now the mountain is *ablaze* – under judgment, and its punishment is enacted with the sea rising over it.

Let me summarize my reading of Revelation so far. I have shown the political nature of God's judgments in Revelation revealed in the seals, which are "worsening man-made calamities" as well as the trumpets which are God's judgments in response to prayer. It may be asked how the seals are also judgments, if they belong to the state of human affairs. Something akin to Paul's statement that God turned people over to their sinful desires (Rom. 2:24-27) is appropriate here: God does not quell the human tendency to conquer. Regardless, that the next three riders *always* follow shows God's judgment because political reign comes to an end. Further, I have shown how in each series of judgments God works in response to prayer. What John has indicated implicitly in the martyrs crying out to God in the fifth seal and God's response in the sixth, he makes explicit in the trumpets. But why does political reign end, aside from the prayers of the people? Why does a warring rider always follow the conquering rider? If O'Donovan's work leads us to consider political authority as stable and likely to endure, John's description enables us to view it as more temporary. To this we now turn.

²⁶ Caird, *Revelation*, 114.

²⁷ Caird, *Revelation*, 114.

The White Rider

To appreciate the cosmic sweep of John's vision, we must first remember that he weeps when no one is found to open the scroll (5:4). Who can make history intelligible? Who can reveal God's purposes? If no one can open the scroll, then these questions are unanswerable and John's weeping is quite appropriate. The Lion of Judah, who has all the appearances of a slain Lamb, can open the scroll, however (5:5-6, 9). He can break the seals which make history's cycle of violence and war inscrutable.²⁸ In response the Lamb receives the worship of the elders and the heavenly throne room. All acknowledge his worth because he alone opens the scroll.

We must also examine the rider of the first seal, the conqueror, to discern why changing political authority is essential.²⁹ Notice the Christ-like, and *only* Christ-like, appearance of the conquering rider. In the first place, he rides a white horse (6:2), as does Christ (19:11). Secondly, this rider is a conqueror (6:2b), which is the exhortation Jesus gives through John to all the churches, because Jesus himself conquered (3:21). Last and most importantly, this conquering rider wears a victor's crown (*stephanos*). This is a subtle but important detail given the stark contrast John draws in chapter 12 between the crown of the woman – who represents Israel/God's people – and the crowns of the dragon who attempts to devour her child. John describes the woman as

²⁸ See Oliver O'Donovan, "History and Politics in the Book of Revelation" in Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (eds.), *Bonds of Imperfection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

²⁹ In so doing, as is evident elsewhere in my interpretation of Revelation, I am using the rider-images of John to shape my discussion of the larger phenomenon of political authority, rather than decoding John's riders as pertaining to specific rulers—whether in his time, or some future time. Of course, as much as one applies John's thought to contemporary events and people, one is 'decoding' to a degree; however, such decoding follows upon the reorientation of one's mind by the text, and cannot be done outright, although elsewhere in John it can be (i.e., the city on seven hills as Rome). For a consideration of the political impact of different interpretations of Revelation, see Christopher Rowland, "The Apocalypse and Political Theology," in Craig Bartholomew, Jonathan Chaplin, Robert Song, Al Wolters (eds.), *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically*, Scripture & Hermeneutics Series, vol. 3 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 241-254.

crowned with the “laurel wreath for victors”³⁰ (12:1) a *stephanos* of twelve stars, while the dragon bears seven *diademata* (12:3). It seems that wearing the *stephanos*, the crown for the conquering rider, is possible for God’s people, whereas the *diademata*, possibly indicating the usurping of all power,³¹ is worn by the dragon and the beast (see *diademata* in 13:1, as part of the description of the beast) in *imitation* of the true King, Jesus. The conquering rider is most certainly not the true Christ, however. The rider carries a bow, whereas a sword comes from the mouth of the White Rider (19:15); the conquering rider is *bent* on conquest, something not said of the Lamb who has already conquered; last, the rider wears a *stephanos* whereas Christ alone truly wears the many *diademata* (19:12).³²

Now we must also contrast the beast from the sea with the Lamb who brings judgment and breaks the seals of judgment. Like the Lamb who looks as if he had been slain (5:6), the beast has a fatal wound that has been healed (13:12). Both wear death wounds that have been overcome. Consider now a more subtle parallel that John draws for us. The beast is worshipped for his ability to conquer. Those who worship him ask, “Who is able to make war against him?” (13:4). As we saw under the judgments of the seals, war always follows upon the heels of conquest; this has always been and will always be the case, prior to Christ’s *parousia*. By appearing as the conqueror, who is also an imitation of the Christ as we saw above, the beast parodies the action of Christ

³⁰ Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 168.

³¹ Witherington, *Revelation*, 168.

³² Interestingly, in chapter 9 John says that the destroying locusts wear *stephanoi* (9:7). Here, John has linked the locusts with a later portrait of Jesus in order to contrast them: First, Jesus, “one like a son of man,” wears a *stephanos* of gold when reaping his harvest (14:14) while the locusts wear “something like *stephanoi* of gold” (emphasis added). Second, consider the nature of the pictures. In one picture, there is a reaper of harvest, while in the other there are destroyers of crops. John’s purpose here is contrast, not comparison.

and receives worship. People worship the beast because he appears to do the work of Jesus the White Rider (19:11-16), that is, ending the cycle of war and empire.

The beast only parodies the White Rider, however, and is ultimately defeated by him. The beast's attempt to make war against the White Rider (19:19), in order to usurp his place, shows the radical difference between the two. The beast, far from making war against the White Rider, is simply captured (19:20) and his followers slain by the sword from the White Rider's mouth – his word. The beast's parody is revealed to be as empty as the song of his followers in 13:4; he cannot even bring war against him. In failing even to bring war against Christ, the cycle of the riders from Revelation 6 is broken. Eternally enduring political authority belongs only to Jesus. Contrary to the belief of the beast's worshipers, there is only one who truly deserves worship as the sole conqueror against whom no one can make war!

A careful reader of Revelation will interject here, however, to remind us that the ten horns on the harlot, which represent ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom (17:12) are said to make war against the Lamb (17:14). By describing these ten kings as ones who will receive power for one hour, John fleshes out of the inevitable nature of empire to fracture and yet live again. However, these kings of limited authority and time give their power to the beast because of their "one purpose": "They will make war against the Lamb" (17:13-14). So, these separated kings give their power and authority to the beast—literally making him the king of kings—in order to make war. But, as seen above, the beast cannot make war; their hope is placed in futility and foolishness. John brings this comical act to an end by reinforcing the contrast between the beast and the Lamb. Contrary to the actions of the ten kings who make the beast their king, John describes the Lamb as "Lord of lords and King of kings" (17:14). The effort of these

kings to “make war” against the Lamb ends with the blink of an eye with their beastly king’s capture!

The title, “Lord of lords and King of Kings,” is repeated in reverse order in 19:16, when the Lamb makes his triumphant return. In contrast to the beast, Jesus “judges and makes war” with justice (19:11). He is described as wearing many crowns, *diademata*, as opposed to the usurping dragon (who wears ten *diademata* in 12:3) and the imitating beast (who wears seven *diademata* in 13:1). The abilities of the dragon and beast are only shown in pale comparison to the true garb and ability of the Lamb.

Now return briefly to the rider of the first seal (6:1-2). The promise of this conquering rider, that he brings conquest, is impermanent: he is overtaken by the rider who brings war. The conquering rider’s multifaceted character, however, shows that this rider’s nature need not necessarily be considered negatively. On the one hand he bears resemblance to Christ, wears the same crown as God’s people and one portrait of God’s king (14:14), and is, like Christ and God’s people, a conqueror. Further, he stands in contrast to the other three evil riders: whereas their horses are fiery red, black, and death-pale, respectively, his is white. On the other hand, though, he is committed to conquest – which, at its extreme, is precisely the temptation to usurp the place of Christ, the lure to exchange the *stephanos* for *diademata*. It is the beast, not the conquering rider necessarily, who horrifically mimics the true Christ, pretending to take true Christ’s place and showing the first rider’s potential for evil. When the first rider is a beast, this conqueror parodies Christ in grotesque and abominable ways. He may even attempt to receive worship. Such an imitation is best described as “Anti-Christ.” When the first rider is not beastly, however, he may have the *appearance*, and *only* the appearance of Christ: the *appearance* of Christ because he conquers; *only* the appearance because war is eventually made against him. Try as he may, enduring political authority is not his. If

we remember the threefold nature of political authority and its necessarily imperfect embodiment by humans, we can see how a good white rider, or a good political authority, can overreach and thereby become a usurper of power. But this usurpation need not come about if enduring political authority is considered a gift of God. It could be the case then, in spite of all the suspicions otherwise, that John the Seer can *imagine* a Christian ruler, that is, one who conquers in a way that faithful believers are to conquer and who wears the *stephanos* of God's people rather than the *diademata* of the grasping beast, which belongs to Jesus. John can imagine a human political authority that operates under the provision of God, though he cannot imagine it enduring forever, because even the Christian ruler is under the judgment of God, and his kingdom cannot remain because war will be made against him.³³

This brings us back to our starting question: why does God allow or cause political reign to end, with all the instability, uncertainty, and human misery that accompanies such breakdown? The answer is because eternally enduring political authority is proper only to the Lordship of Jesus. The worshipers say it most beautifully once the seventh trumpet is sounded:

“The Kingdom of the world has become the
kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ,
and *he will reign for ever and ever*” (11:15, emphasis added).

So why does political reign end? Because *only the Christ that God has chosen, only the Son he has established, can reign for ever and ever*. All other rulers and kings and kingdoms suffer change and defeat, even the ones attempting to resemble God's Christ. The one to

³³ John's description of the ruler, it seems to me, paints him in a light that affirms his potential for only limited good. The king who gets converted may remain a king. Or, political office may be a Christian vocation, though difficult, if the tendency of political office is to seek its own endurance. The Christian ruler would need to understand his impermanence.

whom God shows his providential blessing in enduring political reign is Jesus and Jesus alone. We can now see John's exposition of Psalm 2: "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?...[God] rebukes them, saying, 'I have installed my King!'" (Ps. 2:1, 5-6).³⁴ No other empire or kingdom receives this eternal blessing, and therefore all stand under judgment. If another could have eternally enduring political reign, then he would be the conqueror who could forever quell warring, as those who worshiped the beast thought he could do (13:4). If another could have eternally enduring political reign, then he would be able to break the seals. All changing political authority, then, only goes to show the true reign of Jesus. Only Jesus is the one who will reign eternally.

Before progressing, let me address one potential criticism. In this consideration of political authority, moving back and forth between political authority located in historical governments and the ultimate authority of Christ, has a proper distinction been drawn? Is Jesus' political authority different from historical governments only in by degree, in its length of endurance, or is it different in kind, as well? There is indeed an extreme difference between the reigns of Christ and historical governments, but how does John find the space to critique earthly power from the reign of Christ if the two are utterly alien? For John's critique to be meaningful, there must be space in which these political efforts resemble each other³⁵ and from which the reign of Christ can speak to

³⁴ Caird, *Revelation*, 178.

³⁵ This is the critique O'Donovan ("History and Politics in the Book of Revelation") has for Bauckham when he sees Bauckham making a similar claim, vis-à-vis the categorical difference between divine sovereignty and earthly power. O'Donovan says that Bauckham sees Revelation as "setting us free to envisage our relations with God and world apart from [political concerns]" (26), and notes that on Bauckham's reading, the reader is "set free to experience the transcendence of the divine in a way not comparable to our experience of political power" (26). (O'Donovan notes that Bauckham is not uniform in such a consideration, however [26 n.5].) O'Donovan responds, "If John's interest were only to mark the distance between religious proposition and political program, the amount of substantive political criticism he offers would be meaningless; for the pure religious adept has no more reason to criticize human tyranny than human justice" (29-30).

temporal authority.³⁶ For every contrast the New Testament writers set up between the church, ruled by Christ, and other political bodies, ruled by powers and principalities, the categorical similarities must exist.

The (Changed) Winds of Change

We have now sketched John the Seer's vision for changing political authority. It is part of God's judgment in two ways. First, as being a "natural" part of the fallen created order and second as God's response to the church's prayers. Inasmuch as political authority falls under God's judgment it reminds us that only one will rule, but inasmuch as political authority endures in a Christian manner, namely it resembles the Christ. So, our question becomes even more pertinent: what about *enduring* political authority? How does John understand the relationship between divine providence and enduring political authority?

The framework in which this question is answered has already been sketched: by the judgment of God, political change is inevitable – both from social erosion and the prayers of the saints. Our conclusion, then, begins as follows: political *change* is part of the *positive* work of God's judgment found in the fallen created order and by his response to prayer. This positive work is for the sake of God's Christ because his and only his kingdom will be eternal. Therefore, any notion of *enduring* political authority from Revelation should be considered *negatively* in terms of God's providence. By slowing the processes of change which he has ordained as judgment, God maintains political authority.

The key to our question is found in Rev. 7:1, where John gives his most explicit re-imagination of God's relation to enduring political authority. This passage is

³⁶ Indeed, for O'Donovan Christ's reign imposes limits on secular authority. The relation is close enough that Christ's reign can speak meaningfully to historical governments. See O'Donovan, *Desire*

a reappropriation of Daniel 7, where Daniel records, “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea.” He then goes on to describe four different beasts: a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a “terrifying and frightening and very powerful” beast. These four beasts correspond to political empires: the lion to the Babylonians, the bear to the Medo-Persians, the leopard to the Greeks, and the fourth beast to the Romans. John himself, whose powerful imagination has been shaped remarkably by the Old Testament, reconfigures the vision for his own purposes. In Revelation 13, he combines the first three beasts – the lion, the bear, and the leopard – into the single ghastly beast that we have already examined, who emerges, as in Daniel, from the sea (Rev 13:1-2). [The similarity in these visions is undeniable, yet one change is immediately evident. In Daniel it is the four winds of *heaven* which churn up the great sea, whereas in Revelation the sea is the domain of the dragon: he stands on its shore, seemingly connected to the beast’s emergence, and then confers his power, throne, and great authority on the beast (13:2b).]

Furthermore, in 7:1, John writes, “After this [the destruction wrought by the opening of the sixth seal] I saw the four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the *four winds of the earth* to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree” (emphasis mine). Right away we see a change in the four winds: they are no longer the four winds of heaven, but the four winds of earth. The providence of God which brought about political change in Daniel, the four winds of heaven, is now changed to be part of the created order, the four winds of the *earth*. This reading of political change and God’s providence is reinforced in two ways: first, we

of the Nations, 233.

must bear in mind that this vision is located between the sixth and seventh seals which showed the progression of empire's downfall (the first four seals) and hinted at their providential relation to prayer (the fifth and sixth seals, and the seven trumpets). Second, notice that the wind is kept from blowing on the sea, unlike in Daniel. The change is not complete, however. Four angels are able to keep the four winds from blowing, though they be winds of the earth, reminding us that God's action is not limited by the wind. He remains in mediated control.

The text, however, does not limit itself to the sea; the angels also keep the four winds of the earth from blowing on the land and on any tree (7:1b). What are we to make of this? The key to this passage is located in John's future imagery. First, consider the land. Just as the beast of the sea represents empire, Caird argues that the beast of the earth (13:11-17), which exercises the authority of the beast from the sea and makes the inhabitants of the earth worship the beast (13:12), symbolizes local governments.³⁷ God keeps the four winds of political change from blowing on the earth and the sea, the two potential sources of beastly power.

This symbolism is confirmed when the first bowl of God's wrath is poured out. This bowl is poured out on the land (16:2), the place from whence the second beast comes (13:11). As a result, painful sores break out on the people who bear the mark of the beast of the sea (16:2), which is given by the beast of the earth (13:16), and on those who worshiped the sea-beast's image (16:2), which the beast of the earth forces the inhabitants of the earth to do (13:12). Clearly the location of this bowl's pouring is related to its effects. The ongoing symbolic relationship between the land and the sea, established in Rev. 7, is further developed.

³⁷ Caird, *Revelation*, 171.

But what about the trees? Has John added them simply to continue his nature motif? Certainly not. In Revelation 11 John tells the story of the church in faithful witness to the world, suffering for the symbolic period of forty-two months.³⁸ Here he describes the church in terms of two witnesses (11:3) and, from Zechariah 4, as two lampstands³⁹ and two olive trees (Rev. 11:4; Zech. 4:3, 11-14). It makes good literary sense, then, to conclude that God keeps the four winds of the earth, via his angels, from blowing on any tree, his church.

Does Revelation's co-text support this reading? It surely does. The wind is kept from blowing for one very specific reason: until the foreheads of the "*servants of God*," the church, are sealed (7:3, emphasis added). Again, we are reminded of Zechariah where the olive trees are those anointed to *serve* the Lord (Zech. 4:14). John is telling us that God is not bound by empire or local government, that their change cannot do ultimate harm to the trees, his church, before they have been sealed from ultimate destruction. The peace kept for political authority, by keeping the winds of the earth at bay, is for the work of God in the church. Moreover the destruction that will befall empire is kept from the church. God's church will never be destroyed finally by human political power.

Let us pull these threads together. I have put forth a reading of Rev. 7:1-3 that sees John readapting Daniel's vision of four winds of heaven to be the four winds of earth, over which God still exerts his control, in order to protect the sea and the land, the sources of (potential) empire from harm, and the trees, symbolic of his church, for the sake of his church whom he will seal and keep from ultimate harm. Most amazingly, John combines several themes. He reinforces God's judgment in the natural

³⁸ See Caird, *Revelation*, 130-40.

order, a judgment that causes political authority to wage war and empires to fall by the prayers of the church. But he also envisions God maintaining mediated control of the nations (by his angels, the figures who stand behind nations) for the sake of his church. Or, to put it as John has, the four winds of heaven have become the four winds of earth, but God still controls them.

Perhaps the believer who suffers because an unjust regime persists is now given a less shocking picture. If the persistence of political authority is God's positive gift, then it could seem the sufferer is pushing against God's blessing. If God is merely keeping at bay the forces which bring political erosion, then the suffering believer is not against God, but must find a way to continue the church's mission in the midst of imperfect, perhaps increasingly unjust, political authority.

Enduring Political Authority and the Providence of God

We now have the resources to think through the question of God's providence and enduring political authority. Earlier we saw O'Donovan's theorem: "That any regime should actually come to hold authority and should continue to hold it, is a work of divine providence in history, not a mere accomplishment of the human task of political service."⁴⁰ This claim arises from O'Donovan's theology of history, which provides the space for tradition to occur, which in turn provides part of the basis for political authority. By comparison, Revelation suggests that God's providence is best understood in the *downfall* of political authority—either built into his "natural" judgments of the seven seals or in response to the prayers of his people in the judgments of the seven trumpets. As such, I concluded that in Revelation political

³⁹ Rev. 11:4, Zech. 4:2, though John, as usual, has changed the vision (from one lampstand to two) for his purposes.

⁴⁰ O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 46.

change, not stability, is the positive work of God in history, which points to the eternal reign of his Christ—that which makes history intelligible. This led to a consideration of God's providential work, through mediators (angels), in holding back the four winds of the earth from blowing for the purpose of sealing his people. In other words, history will not become so cyclically implosive in politics, nor will God be moved to such ferocious judgment on political authority, that a group of people will not be rescued. *God remains in control for his purposes.* This, then, is what we shall say about the comparison of O'Donovan and Revelation concerning the relationship between enduring political authority and the providence of God: O'Donovan notes God's positive relationship to enduring political authority, while Revelation highlights God's negative providence holding back the forces of political change.

Is this formulation a distinction without difference? I believe its value lies in providing the resources to consider two issues. First, it allows pastoral and existential comfort for the Christian suffering under unjust, yet enduring, political power. Such political power may in fact be political authority, though not necessarily. In light of Revelation, the church may consider the tyrant who maintains power as not possessing God's blessing, though not completely opposed by God either. Second, it provides space for dialogue in the face of questionable representation. If God keeps destabilizing forces at bay, and if there is a vacuum which demands some form of political power, then a sustained tyrannical government, though it may not represent its people accurately, may resemble them better than other rebellious and hopeful suitors. A church under such a regime is sustained by the hope that a suitable representative may not be rejected by God for long, and can aim to shape such hopeful representation even by examining the visage of the current regime, and recognizing God's providential role in its maintenance. If, as O'Donovan says, "[s]ecuring the relation between government

and people is the aim of all political activity,"⁴¹ then the church can remain an eschatological community even while performing political acts in the form of dialogue. If God is not simply sustaining the *de facto* political power, the church is encouraged to work to shape the destabilizing forces that may become God's next blessed regime. Perhaps the opposing forces may become, by the church's insight, less "arbitrary."⁴²

Yet most importantly, the good news remains the good news of the slaughtered and risen Lamb. Sustained political authority makes sense because history is not unintelligible. Whether political authority endures by God's grace or is torn down by the prayers of his people, they remain pointers in history to the reign of Christ: the conquering rider in a positive but limited way, and the beast in a negative and pathetic way. As political authority endures, it bears limited resemblance to Christ. As empires fall, we are reminded of the One whose reign is eternal, against whom no one can make war. But it is the reign of this Lamb which makes history intelligible, and so makes tradition – and legitimate political authority – possible.⁴³

Conclusion

Regarding the endurance of political authority, I have compared two visions. First, the work of Oliver O'Donovan presents a positive understanding whereby providence actively establishes and preserves political authority. Secondly, John's Revelation presents a negative picture in which God holds at bay the forces which

⁴¹ O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 180.

⁴² See above, n. 10.

⁴³ In this sense we can affirm O'Donovan's hermeneutic strategy when he started with political authority in Israel, moving to other nations. Now, however, we start with the political authority of Christ and move to earthly kingdoms. This hermeneutic has also been touched on by Jonathan Chaplin, although with greater nuance, and acknowledged by O'Donovan. See Jonathan Chaplin, "Political Eschatology and Responsible Government: Oliver O'Donovan's 'Christian Liberalism,'" in *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically*, 265-308. Also, see O'Donovan's response in the same volume and his brief word in *Ways of Judgment*, 143.

destabilize political authority. Is there a difference between the two visions?⁴⁴ While it would take the difficult work of political theology to engage the two visions vis-à-vis tyrannical authority, I believe that the distinction between the two becomes important in the sets of questions thoughtful believers ask. A positive notion of endurance forces questions such as, “How does *this* government order society well?” “What can be emulated?” Perhaps most importantly, “How does this regime mirror, however imperfectly, that of Christ?” From the negative formulation, different questions arise. “What efforts has God opposed?” “Why has God opposed other revolutionaries and those with differing visions for authority?” We are in the midst of witnessing what happens when a regime is toppled without (significant and rigorous) consideration for why opposition had not toppled it earlier. If O’Donovan is correct that brute power and human craft alone cannot answer for the stability of a regime, and I believe he is, then brute power cannot be the sole thumb that oppresses would-be revolutionaries. Asking questions about providence and longevity can only help the necessary mixture of questions concerning idealism and practicality.

I conclude, then, with an exhortation in the tradition of John the Seer for the universal people of God, no longer ultimately defined by our political or national identities, to act as conquerors—to be people who are able to discern the times and tell what must take place. O’Donovan is quite correct in saying that as believers, as conquerors, “[w]e are invited to read the legend of history by conceiving its tragedies as a progressive loss of freedom within which we may see the purposes of justice and the hand of God.”⁴⁵ This justice, however, that God has established in history is achieved eschatologically by the eternal victory of his Christ. And since only Christ Jesus’ reign

⁴⁴ Indeed, in personal correspondence, O’Donovan voiced this question, asking whether this was a “distinction without difference.”

is eternal, we participate as sealed believers in the “sphere of freedom [that] is an anti-political sphere of prayer and prophecy.”⁴⁶ As praying and prophesying believers (most importantly as praying and prophesying believers!), confident that God responds with the seven trumpet judgments, we continue working, by the Spirit who elicits prophecy and intercedes with prayers, to achieve our Lord’s kingdom which is forever reigned by his Christ (Rev. 11:15).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ O’Donovan, “History and Politics in the Book of Revelation,” 33.

⁴⁶ O’Donovan, “History and Politics in the Book of Revelation,” 34.

⁴⁷ Thanks to Oliver O’Donovan, Tim Perry, and Chuck Gutenson for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.